



# Mason City Public Transit Strategic Communications Campaign

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# **Mason City Public Transit 2017 Campaign**

## **Table of Contents**

- Executive Summary
- Organizational and Situational Analysis
- Research Reports and Findings
- Strategies
- Budget and Implementation
- Evaluation
- Appendix: Crisis Communication Plan
- Conclusion

## **Executive Summary**

The Mason City Public Transit is an organization in Mason City, Iowa run through their government. Mason City is a small urban area in Northern Iowa that connects with Marshalltown, Ottumwa and Clinton. The public transportation is based around their bus system that has five routes running at all times. It is open to the general public, including those with disabilities, and operates from 6:30am-5:30pm Monday through Friday, except on certain holidays. They charge a \$0.50 fare per one-way ride, though they get government funding per ride. Steven Van Steenhuyse, Director of the Development Services Department, is the main contact through this campaign, but recently hired a Transit Operations and Safety Manager, Dylan Schulte.

Through research, surveys and interviews, we were able to get a better understanding of how the Mason City residents perceive the public transit system. While some do not need to take the bus because they have other forms of transit, others feel that they would ride it more if some things changed. Hours and routes are not the most sufficient for most community members, which is holding them back from taking the bus more often or at all. By addressing these problems, we hope to increase ridership and change the public perception to a positive one. By setting goals and objectives, as well as set strategies for Steven and Dylan to follow to help increase ridership and get the word out about the bus system, should give them a better idea of what they can do to improve the system.

Mason City Public Transit has the ability to increase its ridership and expand to a different demographic by reaching out and advertising more specifically. Also, by updating their website and using social media would benefit them to reach out to a wider audience. The transit system needs to change their hours and routes to be more flexible for the community, more signage for riders, and making the bus system perceived as more sustainable. By becoming a more sustainable way for the community to get around, they will have a more positive perception within the

### **Mason City Public Transit 2017 Campaign**

Mariah Jones, Hanna Beary, Katie Sextro, Nikko Ebbola, Ben Marks

area and attract more riders. Overall, Mason City Public Transit needs some updating and changes if they want to stay relevant and operating around the community.

### **Organizational Analysis**

#### *Internal Environment:*

The Mason City Public Transit has a brand new Transit Operations and Safety Manager in Dylan Schulte. Stephen Van Steenhuyse, who was serving as the Interim Transit Manager, mentioned that the transit's performance has been good, but they have just had trouble attracting new riders and widening their demographics. He also mentioned they need help with advertising and different marketing campaigns in order to increase ridership. They have excelled in providing transportation to the elderly and disabled, as well as those who lack other means of transportation. The system they use for pick-up could use a bit of work as he mentioned they have received a few complaints about people not being picked up or drivers not seeing them at their stops.

The company consists of 16 buses, two of which are brand new. They have a bus procurement system that is bringing in three new buses in the next year. They plan to use these three new buses to replace three of the older ones. The staff consists of 12 regular drivers and four subs all of who work part-time. Stephen pointed out that many of the drivers are older and this has caused some problems with hearing and missing stops.

#### *External Environment:*

One of the biggest external restraints to our campaign is the lack of flexibility and money in the transit system. Strapped with old and outdated buses, and a lack of clear signage or advertising space in the city, we aren't left with a lot of places to improve the actual look of the system in the city. We'll mostly have to rely on their Internet presence and other low cost, but far-reaching methods. The other issue is that a lot of the routes don't service areas that are currently in need, leading to

the public perception that the transit system is inconvenient. We also discussed improving the image of other transit areas, such as biking and walking. However, with an incomplete system of dedicated biking or walking paths, or sidewalks, there isn't much we can do but increase people's awareness of the existing infrastructure.

Luckily, the transit system doesn't have that much external competition. They are the biggest public transit system in the community, and with a lack of Uber or other taxi programs, they have most of the market.

### *SWOT Analysis:*

#### *Strengths*

- They have a very well organized website.
- The map that shows all the routes and stop times is very easy to read and understand.
- They have a good rapport with their current riders.
- They have buses that are handicap accessible.
- They have a brand new transit manager ready to take on new tasks.

#### *Weaknesses*

- Their limited hours make it harder for them to expand their ridership.
- They have a "midnight special" that picks up after hours, but they have no mention of it on their website or anywhere online.
- The drivers do not have uniforms.
- They do not have a very strong advertising campaign.
- They have a very weak social media presence.
- The majority of the bus stops are not marked by signs.

#### *Opportunities*

- They have access to Community College students and could expand their ridership by appealing to that demographic.
- They could do a "students ride free day", where if they show their student ID they get a free ride.

### **Mason City Public Transit 2017 Campaign**

Mariah Jones, Hanna Beary, Katie Sextro, Nikko Ebbole, Ben Marks

- They could talk with the NIACC and see about getting an advertisement on their website so it is more visible for the students.
- They have a lot of flexibility with fares since they do not make much money off of the fares anyway
  - They can have a Dump the Pump special to try and get people to go green.
  - They can have a charity day where all the proceeds from fares go to local charities.
  - They can do a Veterans Day special where veterans ride free and all other fares go to like a VA Hospital.

### *Threats*

- The possible expansion of Uber to Mason City poses a threat to the public transit.
- Multiple taxicab services in the area also pose a threat to the public transit.
- The poor perception that people have of the bus keeps some people from riding it.
- The small market makes it hard for them to draw enough people in to ride the bus.
- The large number of other forms of transportation such as walking, biking, or carpooling draws a large interest as well.

### *Public Perception:*

The public transit system for the Mason City area serves a small portion of the community. Assisted living facilities as well as disability centers are two prime target audiences that use the public transit system. The Mason City public transit team created a survey to determine both obstacles and opportunities for the Mason City public transit and placed it on the Mason City Facebook page. According to this survey the public is well aware of the public transit system as well as the night option available. However the reputation of the bus system is

### **Mason City Public Transit 2017 Campaign**

Mariah Jones, Hanna Beary, Katie Sextro, Nikko Ebbola, Ben Marks

subpar. When asked why the individual does not take the public transit the majority answered that they drove themselves, carpool or walk. Another response was that individuals felt as if the buses were unsafe and had undesirable individuals riding. They also described that the outbound trip was short but the inbound trip was too long. Through this campaign we aim to change the public perception that only “weirdos” ride the bus by changing bus routes and hours, special events and promoting going green.

### **Situational Analysis**

The public transportation system faces several communication challenges. In our initial meeting with Steven Van Steenhuyse, the Director of the Development Services Department, he said they do a poor job of advertising the transit system. Now that they are transitioning to their new Transit Operations and Safety Manager, Dylan Schulte, their biggest goals are to find a way to get the word out that public transportation is an option in Mason City and that it is the best, most sustainable choice. They also want to improve the public’s view of the transit system. They have the ability to get the word out, but they aren’t sure what to say and what platform to use to convey their messages.

The City Administration Assistant is in charge of the city’s Facebook account, but the transit system has access to it and would be able to post messages if needed. The public transportation system does not have any separate social media accounts. They worry that not many of their riders use social media so they wouldn’t see messages posted using Facebook or Twitter. They would like to create an app so people can see where the buses are and when one will arrive, but they don’t have the means or funds to do that yet. They can also post messages on the city’s general website. The only place to find information about public transportation in Mason City is on the city’s page, but it’s a little hard to find. You have to choose the About Mason City tab then transportation then transit. They face a challenge here because some people might struggle to find the transit page. The page itself is also a communication challenge because they

#### **Mason City Public Transit 2017 Campaign**

Mariah Jones, Hanna Beary, Katie Sextro, Nikko Ebbola, Ben Marks

don't include what the buses look like or how much a bus pass costs. The department would like to add more information, update the current information and recreate more appealing route maps.

We think the biggest challenge the transit system faces is figuring out how to communicate to the general public of Mason City, especially younger people, that the bus system is available and the best option for them. In order to increase ridership and improve the transit system more people need to be aware that it exists and they need to be convinced to use it. Another challenge that goes along with that is choosing the best and most effective way to communicate that to people. We think that by updating their current website, creating social media accounts, specifically their own Facebook and advertising around town and at NIACC with flyers they will be able to overcome their communication challenges.

*Identify Publics:*

Currently, there are an estimate of 100 individuals who opt into riding the public transit each day. A large majority of this public are individuals through assisted living facilities as well as disabled living facilities. The Mason City public transit team believes that two key publics to target is other assisted living facilities as well as Mercy Hospital employees. In the near future we also intend to target college students. There are multiple assisted living and disabled facilities in the Mason City area that currently do not utilize the public transit system. By building a relationship with other facilities, the transit system would be able to identify times and stops that would help benefit these facilities showing them the benefits of using the public transit. Mercy Hospital employees are also a key public because of the convenience of the bus stop. There is a bus stop located in front of the hospital, serving as a great convenience to those needing transportation. By informing the employees of the bus stop, they will have the knowledge and the tools needed to make their own informed decision for transit use. The public transit is a positive solution for transportation because it helps reduce Mason City's carbon footprint. College students are also a prime target for this campaign

**Mason City Public Transit 2017 Campaign**

Mariah Jones, Hanna Beary, Katie Sextro, Nikko Ebbola, Ben Marks

due to convenience. It is hard to function around a college campus without means of transportation. The Mason City public transit travels to the NIACC campus, the hospital, as well as the downtown shopping area. The low cost and convenience of the new bus routes will encourage these publics to ride the public transit.

### **Research Report and Findings**

The Mason City Public Transit is an organization in Mason City, Iowa run through their government. Mason City is a small urban town in Northern Iowa with their public transportation based around their bus system, which has five routes running during service hours. It is open to the general public, including those with disabilities, and operates from 6:30am-5:30pm Monday through Friday, except on certain holidays. Steven Van Steenhuyse, Director of the Development Services Department, is the main contact through this campaign as they train the new Transit Manager. The main problem that Steven would like us to address is to increase ridership throughout Mason City on their current public transit and give it a better reputation. By conducting surveys and interviews, our goal was to discover the best way to reach the community and get a better understanding of how they feel about the public transit system running through Mason City.

### *Information Sought*

One of the biggest challenges that the Mason City transit system faces is advertising the bus system and reaching the general public. By conducting research through interviews and surveys our goal was to discover the best way to get information out to the public. We needed to know the best way to reach people whether that be through Facebook, Twitter, adding more information on the Mason City website or something else. We were curious if social media would be a good channel to communicate information and needed to find out if a separate social media account for the bus system would be worthwhile. It was also important for us to discover if the general public is aware of the bus system, what the perception of it is and why people don't ride.

### **Mason City Public Transit 2017 Campaign**

Mariah Jones, Hanna Beary, Katie Sextro, Nikko Ebbola, Ben Marks

Through our interviews and survey we wanted to discover what types of people ride the bus and see if our assumptions were correct. We asked if people are aware of the bus, what type of transportation they use the most, if they ride the bus and if not why, what would incentivize them to ride and what they feel could improve the bus system. Gathering information about the public's attitudes towards the bus system and behavior really helped in determining the best way to go about promoting it, changing certain things to improve it, and increasing ridership.

### *Information Gathering Techniques*

#### Secondary Research

To begin our research on the bus system we started with a quick Google search to see what came up. One of the first things we found was their website. However, their website is sparse, and contains very little usable information, including no information on their late night programs, bus pass costs, or other basic information riders need to know. Through our Internet searching we also discovered that the bus system doesn't have any social media accounts, instead relying on the Mason City Facebook page to provide information. This means that their website and calling city hall are the only way to obtain information about the system. Some other secondary research we were able to use however was the bus system's ridership data from the past year. From the data we found that they had 301,614 riders last year, including their disabled and elderly riders programs. This broke down to roughly 1,160 riders a day, five days a week, with elderly riders making up 23% of their riders, and disabled riders making up 13% of their riders, both significant sections of their market.

Another resource we were able to obtain was a business report compiled by UI students last semester. This report detailed in depth, many of the transit systems issues as well as their strengths. The report compared Mason City to other similarly sized cities to see how the transit system stacked up. What they found

#### **Mason City Public Transit 2017 Campaign**

Mariah Jones, Hanna Beary, Katie Sextro, Nikko Ebbale, Ben Marks

was that Mason City was the cheapest city to ride in at only .50 cents a ride, while other bus systems cost at least a dollar, and sometimes a \$1.50.

### Interviews

One technique of gathering information taken throughout this campaign is in-person interviews. The interviewing process has proven to be an effective information gathering tool because of the information found. By interviewing four different individuals we were able to identify the stigma that individuals pair with the public transit system. We interviewed the following:

- Public transit bus driver/a loyal rider
- Administrator at NIACC as well as a student
- City employee

We wrote a variety of specific questions towards each target audiences inquiring information on the knowledge and use of the public transit. Through the personal interviews we learned that the individuals believe that there are many obstacles stopping the transit system to being more successful. One obstacle is the bus operating times. Many individuals feel as if the hours were extended that more city employees would be more likely to ride. Riders would also like to see a more available weekend option. Some individuals are unable to travel to do shopping during the week and need to find the means to travel during the weekend. Offering a weekend option would give riders that option. Individuals find the bus unappealing due to the upkeep of the bus, especially during the winter. The unappealing and unclean feel serves as an obstacle for obtaining more riders. By implementing a cleaning routine would be a simple fix for this problem.

A recurring issue mentioned was the bus route. The short in-going route is appealing but the long out-going route serves as a turnoff to riders. An opportunity to correct this would be to create different routes and no longer run on a loop system. The nursing home employees found that the bus fluctuated in arrival and departure time, making it difficult to plan accordingly to. Individuals were impressed with the friendless of the bus drivers as well low fares. Through

### **Mason City Public Transit 2017 Campaign**

Mariah Jones, Hanna Beary, Katie Sextro, Nikko Ebbale, Ben Marks

the interviewing processing we gathered that individuals believe that with better bus routes, times, and cleanliness would help obtain a higher ridership.

### Survey

We also chose to use a survey in order to gather information from all different residents of Mason City. A survey is a very useful tool when looking for information on the population as a whole and get a feel for how many people are currently using the bus, and more importantly what kind of things the Mason City Public Transit can do in order to get the people who are not using the bus system to join in. For our survey we wrote a variety of questions to accomplish a few different things. We first asked a handful of demographic questions to get a feel for what types of people we were reaching out to. We asked questions about age, family size, and employment. We went on to find out whether or not they ride the bus currently, and if not, what kind of transportation they prefer. Finally, we used it to find out what Mason City Public Transit can do to increase ridership (offer deals, be more active on social media etc.).

As far as target publics, we reached out to the general population of Mason City, but more specifically we hope to reach a large group of people who do not currently use the bus system in order to give us a better idea of what kind of marketing strategy would be best to increase ridership. Some of these publics include the students at NIACC, employees at Mercy Hospital, and city employees.

Through the survey we learned many important things about the people of Mason City and their feelings toward the bus system. We came to be aware through the survey that people are very aware that the transit exists so exposure isn't really a huge issue. The big issue seemed to be more that people simply prefer other, more convenient forms of transportation. More visibility through bus stop signs and more convenient hours and route structure were some other things people pointed out that would entice them to ride the bus more often.

#### **Mason City Public Transit 2017 Campaign**

Mariah Jones, Hanna Beary, Katie Sextro, Nikko Ebbola, Ben Marks

Another obstacle people seemed to be in agreement on was the fact that they perceive those who ride the bus as “weird”. This presents another tough task for us to redefine the persona of those who ride the bus. We were hoping the Mason City Public transit would be able to change this by offering to donate fares to charities or doing a Mercy Hospital workers ride free day in order to draw more riders and increase the reputation of the bus. Furthermore, we came to find that people of Mason City would very much like to see the public transit active on Facebook and posting more often and keeping their website updated.

**Survey Results: 103 online and paper responses**

**Q1 - Are you aware that a bus system exists in Mason City?**

| # | Answer             | %      | Count |
|---|--------------------|--------|-------|
| 1 | Strongly aware     | 91.09% | 92    |
| 2 | Slightly aware     | 8.91%  | 9     |
| 3 | Not really aware   | 0.00%  | 0     |
| 4 | Completely unaware | 0.00%  | 0     |
|   | Total              | 100%   | 101   |

**Q2 - What is your usual source of transportation?**

| # | Answer  | %      | Count |
|---|---------|--------|-------|
| 1 | Walking | 6.86%  | 7     |
| 2 | Biking  | 4.90%  | 5     |
| 3 | Driving | 45.10% | 46    |

|   |                        |        |     |
|---|------------------------|--------|-----|
| 4 | Car-pooling            | 11.76% | 12  |
| 5 | Riding the bus         | 19.61% | 20  |
| 6 | Other (please specify) | 11.76% | 12  |
|   | Total                  | 100%   | 102 |

**Q3 - How often do you use public transportation?**

| # | Answer                 | %      | Count |
|---|------------------------|--------|-------|
| 1 | Never                  | 35.64% | 36    |
| 2 | 2-3 times a year       | 10.89% | 11    |
| 3 | 2-3 times a month      | 24.75% | 25    |
| 4 | 2-3 time a week        | 10.89% | 11    |
| 5 | Every day              | 12.87% | 13    |
| 6 | Other (please specify) | 4.95%  | 5     |
|   | Total                  | 100%   | 101   |

|                                |
|--------------------------------|
| Other (Please specify)         |
| Never but I want to know more. |
| Rarely                         |
| Winter                         |
| 4-5 times a week               |
| Only if my car is not working. |

**Q4 - What keeps you from riding the bus?**

| # | Answer                                 | %      | Count |
|---|--|--------|-------|
| 1 | Nothing, I ride the bus regularly      | 27.00% | 27    |
| 2 | I prefer other forms of transportation | 32.00% | 32    |

|   |                                       |        |     |
|---|---------------------------------------|--------|-----|
| 3 | I feel the bus is unsafe              | 0.00%  | 0   |
| 4 | I don't live on a bus route           | 8.00%  | 8   |
| 5 | Lack of information on the bus system | 4.00%  | 4   |
| 6 | Poor hours of operation               | 6.00%  | 6   |
| 7 | Other (please specify)                | 23.00% | 23  |
|   | Total                                 | 100%   | 100 |

Other (please specify)

Don't live on a route, lack of info, poor hours. I would take the bus everyday if they have a wide and detailed route

Lack of info and poor hours

Nothing, and I prefer other forms of transportation

Nothing, and I prefer other forms

I prefer other forms of transportation, Other: I'd rather walk

Cheaper to carpool

Big weirdos

Out of area

Money

Length of time to transfer, need weekend

**Mason City Public Transit 2017 Campaign**

Mariah Jones, Hanna Beary, Katie Sextro, Nikko Ebbola, Ben Marks

|   |
|---|
| Car pooling   |
| Need weekend  |
| Filthy buses  |
| I drive my car or go with my husband                                |
| Sometimes you have to ride for over an hour after you are picked up |
| Bus does not go to my place of employment                           |
| I have a car, and just don't think about using public transit.      |
| I have my own Transportation I rely on.                             |
| Required to have my personal car at work                            |
| I am not against using the bus. I just don't need to.               |
| Weirdos ride it   |
| I prefer my own vehicle.  |
| Bus loop means a short outbound trip, but a very long inbound trip  |

**Q5 - What would make you more likely to ride the bus?**

| # | Answer                                    | %     | Count |
|---|---|-------|-------|
| 1 | Cheaper fares                             | 4.95% | 5     |
| 2 | Incentives like discounts at local stores | 5.94% | 6     |

|   |                                  |        |     |
|---|----------------------------------|--------|-----|
| 3 | More visibility of the bus stops | 4.95%  | 5   |
| 4 | Longer hours of operation        | 15.84% | 16  |
| 5 | Nothing                          | 49.50% | 50  |
| 6 | Other (please specify)           | 18.81% | 19  |
|   | Total                            | 100%   | 101 |

Other (please specify)

More visibly stops, longer hours. Veteran fares, more routes, more frequency

Cheaper fares and longer hours

Maybe when I get older

To get places

All of the above

Out of location

N/A

Free rides

N/A

|   |
|---|
| Weekend   |
| Open rider  |
| Weekend hours   |
| Kinder drivers, clean buses   |
| More visibility of bus stops, and more bus stops  |
| Better routes, cheaper fares, longer hours, better awareness, lifestyle change, new habits, probably nothing. |
| If my car quits running and I cannot afford to repair or replace it.  |
| Convenience   |
| Special Events with limited parking.  |
| Better route planning   |

**Q6 - Are you aware that the bus system has an on demand late night route?**

| # | Answer | %      | Count |
|---|--------|--------|-------|
| 1 | Yes    | 59.00% | 59    |
| 2 | No     | 41.00% | 41    |
|   | Total  | 100%   | 100   |

**Q7 - What websites would you like to see the bus system active on?**

| # | Answer | % | Count |
|---|--------|---|-------|
|---|--------|---|-------|

|   |                               |        |    |
|---|-------------------------------|--------|----|
| 1 | Facebook                      | 45.16% | 42 |
| 2 | Twitter                       | 1.08%  | 1  |
| 3 | Mason City website            | 21.51% | 20 |
| 4 | Bus system mobile application | 9.68%  | 9  |
| 5 | Other (pleas specify)         | 22.58% | 21 |
|   | Total                         | 100%   | 93 |

**Q8 - What is your age range?**

| # | Answer      | %      | Count |
|---|-------------|--------|-------|
| 1 | Under 18    | 0.00%  | 0     |
| 2 | 18 - 24     | 6.00%  | 6     |
| 3 | 25 - 34     | 21.00% | 21    |
| 4 | 35 - 44     | 27.00% | 27    |
| 5 | 45 - 54     | 23.00% | 23    |
| 6 | 55 - 64     | 15.00% | 15    |
| 7 | 65 - 74     | 8.00%  | 8     |
| 8 | 75 - 84     | 0.00%  | 0     |
| 9 | 85 or older | 0.00%  | 0     |
|   | Total       | 100%   | 100   |

**Q9 - I am...**

| # | Answer                                 | %     | Count |
|---|--|-------|-------|
| 1 | A student at NIACC                     | 6.25% | 6     |
| 2 | A faculty member at NIACC              | 1.04% | 1     |
| 3 | An employee for Mercy Medical Hospital | 5.21% | 5     |

|                           |                        |        |    |
|---------------------------|------------------------|--------|----|
| 4                         | Other (please specify) | 87.50% | 84 |
|                           | Total                  | 100%   | 96 |
| Other (please specify)    |                        |        |    |
| Retired                   |                        |        |    |
| Resident                  |                        |        |    |
| Retired                   |                        |        |    |
| Work at Pepsi             |                        |        |    |
| Work at Edward Jones      |                        |        |    |
| Culver's                  |                        |        |    |
| N/A                       |                        |        |    |
| Hy-Vee                    |                        |        |    |
| An employee for the city  |                        |        |    |
| Rec Director              |                        |        |    |
| Work at Wal-Mart          |                        |        |    |
| Niacc employee off campus |                        |        |    |
| Employed                  |                        |        |    |

|                         |
|-------------------------|
| Cashier at Affordables  |
| Govt                    |
| A citizen of Mason City |
| Retired                 |
| Curries employee        |
| Welder                  |
| Employed                |
| Citizen                 |
| Professional driver     |
| Retired educator        |
| Mason City resident     |
| A stay at home mom      |
| Citizen                 |
| Retired                 |
| Work in Mason City      |
| Citizen                 |

|  |
|--|
| Still working at a job 4 days a week, and I drive there from home. |
| Retired  |
| A full time employee who lives and works in Mason City             |
| Person that lives and works in Mason City                          |
| City employee.   |
|  |

**Q10 - How many children are you a parent or guardian for (aged 17 or younger?)**

| # | Answer      | %      | Count |
|---|-------------|--------|-------|
| 1 | None        | 66.67% | 66    |
| 2 | 1           | 11.11% | 11    |
| 3 | 2           | 12.12% | 12    |
| 4 | 3           | 7.07%  | 7     |
| 5 | 4           | 0.00%  | 0     |
| 6 | More than 4 | 3.03%  | 3     |
|   | Total       | 100%   | 99    |

## **Strategies**

### *Goals and Objectives*

#### Goals:

1. Relationship: create and maintain/enhance a lasting relationship with the Mason City community
2. Reputation: improve public transportation reputation with the community
3. Task: increase public ridership

#### Objectives:

1. Awareness: to increase awareness of the Mason City public transportation to Mercy hospital workers by 10% within six months.
2. Acceptance: to positively change the perceptions of riding the bus in Mason City in the next six months.
3. Action: to increase ridership by 5% within six months.

### *Action Strategies*

We suggest several action strategies that the Mason City Transit department implement in order to attract, increase and maintain ridership, improve the relationship with the public and enhance the reputation of riding the bus. These strategies all benefit the transit system as well as the general public and several businesses in Mason City.

The first strategy we suggest is a special event that can be altered in several different ways. An example is a 'Students ride free day'. Using flyers the transit system can use these to advertise to students that they are able to take the bus for free for a day. This can also be a 'Ride to work for free day' in which the transit system would target everyone who works in Mason City. This is similar to the current "Dump the Pump" activity the transit system already does, but targets a more specific audience for each one.

The second strategy we suggest would be for the transit system to partner with a local business and offer coupons or deals at that particular business when you ride the bus on a certain day. This could be a form of sponsorship for the buses and would benefit the local business because it would be advertising for them as well as hopefully increasing the number of people that use their services/buy their products. This is also beneficial for the bus system because it is an incentive for people to take the bus.

The next strategy that we suggest would be a more official sponsorship. The transit system would find a local business that is interested in partnering with the Mason City transit system to be an official sponsor. They would have their logo on a bus wrap which would promote their brand and services. This is great advertising for a business as well as a good source of income for the transit system.

Another strategy that would be great for the transit system to implement is a "Ride for Charity Fridays". The transit system would find several charities to pair up with and one Friday a month the public would be encouraged to ride the bus to help support a local or national charity. Using flyers the transit system would advertise this around town. Using the fares from the riders the Mason City transit system would donate half of that day's profit to the charity chosen for that particular Friday. This would be a great strategy for Mason City to implement because it would enhance their image and give them a really good reputation. The general public would have incentive to ride the bus as well since they know their fares are going towards a good cause.

### *Message Strategies*

Social Media: One of the most important things for the Mason City bus system to do is to establish its own social media. In our survey, the majority of people said they'd like to see the bus system on its own social media page, and we agree that would be a smart move. Facebook and Twitter are easy, simple platforms,

### **Mason City Public Transit 2017 Campaign**

Mariah Jones, Hanna Beary, Katie Sextro, Nikko Ebbola, Ben Marks

which large demographics of people use, and both the platforms can be used to convey quick, last minute updates such as weather or route changes. Creating a separate page from the Mason City Facebook page will give the bus system its own identity online, allowing it to connect more closely with its ridership.

**Website:** Currently the bus system has a page on the Mason City website. However the website contains minimal information and is not the most aesthetically pleasing or navigable. By putting in a little maintenance into their website, we believe they'll see a reduced volume of phone calls from riders, and an increased presence online and in social media. We recommend linking the website and social media accounts so that people discovering one can easily find the other. We also recommend altering the design of the website a bit in order to put up a little more information on the routes, fares, monthly passes, and midnight special bus route, information which our survey showed the riders did not know about. Currently you must call city hall if you want to buy a bus pass rather than pay for each ride, and the price is not listed online. The bus system receives a lot of phone calls for information like this, which takes up office time and is inefficient. Taking and uploading pictures of the buses will also help people identify what the buses look like. Updating the website and linking social media could help solve this.

**Bus Wrap:** A bus wrap costs roughly \$5,000, which is too expensive for the transit system to do alone, but partnered with local businesses it would be a more affordable option. The business would pay for the majority of the wrap and get guaranteed advertising out of it, while the transit system can get an appearance overhaul and ad revenue from it.

**Bus Signs:** Currently many of the bus stops in Mason City are empty street corners with no stop information, bus schedule or delay notifications. This leads to a lot of riders calling city hall wondering where the bus is when it's just running a bit late. If schedule information was posted along with standard time deviations,

**Mason City Public Transit 2017 Campaign**

Mariah Jones, Hanna Beary, Katie Sextro, Nikko Ebbola, Ben Marks

then this will decrease the amount of phone calls received and free up office time.

Radio Ad: Many of the bus system's current riders are older, and advertising the bus system on local radio can effectively reach that older demographic. Local radio can also be very cheap and cost effective, and a smart move financially for the transit system. In addition, radio is one of the only ad techniques that reach mainly drivers. And so advertising a bus system to people who usually drive would mean emphasizing the savings riding the bus could bring as well as the environmental friendliness of it.

### *Tactics*

In order to get their messages out to the public the Mason City transit system will mostly rely on owned and earned media tactics. We do suggest a couple strategies that do require some funds to start up, but we believe they are worthwhile. We also have a promotional schedule in mind that will help implement our suggested strategies.

The first tactic that can be implemented is creating a separate Facebook page is a form of owned media and will not cost the transit system any money to make announcements, share information, promote an event or deal or post bus schedules. This is also a form of organizational media as it is published and controlled by the transit system. Implementing a Facebook page will also be a great way to reach large audiences.

We also suggest enhancing the Mason City transit system website. Many of our survey results requested a better website where people can find information they need. This is a very cheap and easy way to relay information out to the public. This would also be a form of owned and organizational media. Editing and enhancing the website will be under the transit system's control. This is a great

### **Mason City Public Transit 2017 Campaign**

Mariah Jones, Hanna Beary, Katie Sextro, Nikko Ebbole, Ben Marks

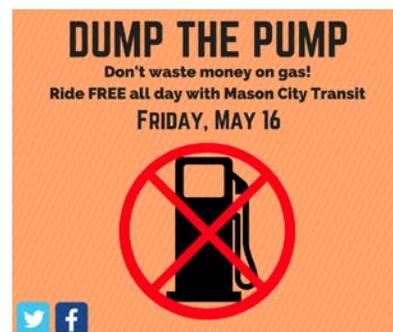
platform to post the bus schedules, possibly add more and post their promotional calendar.

Our ride-for-free days such as the “Students ride free day” or “Ride to work for free day” will be great forms of owned and interpersonal communication tactics. We also advise the transit system promote the message that riding the bus is a great way to “go green.” We have an example of a flyer that could be used for Earth Day, but it could also be used several times a year with the words, “Every Day is Earth Day, protect the world, ride the bus.”



These special event type promotions will encourage interaction with the bus system, hopefully draw in more money and will be cost-effective to implement. In order to promote these events flyers will be created that can be used on digital forms (their personal website, the Mason City Facebook page and the transit system’s new Facebook page) as well as print forms and hung at various businesses around town and NIACC. This tactic will hopefully attract audiences that have not previously ridden the bus and encourage them to continue riding.

We also suggest a “Ride for charity day” that could be implemented either one Friday a month throughout the year. As we discussed earlier, the transit system would pair with either a local charity, a national charity, a local school, youth group, etc. and for one Friday of the month a portion of the fares would go towards that specific organization. This would be a great special event to implement because it would be very beneficial for the transit system as well as the organization they choose to work with.



In order to implement these tactics we have created a mock promotional content calendar that can be used to help put these into place. The example calendar starts promotions on May 16th, when the “Dump the Pump” promotion could be implemented. Since this is an event the transit system has already done it would be good to start with this one. An alternate slogan that could be used is “Go green and make riding the bus routine.”

The next promotion in May would be on the 23rd;



we suggest pairing up with HyVee or another local business and call it “(Business name) Ride Free Day.” On the



29th, Memorial Day, we advise having a “Veterans Ride Free Day.” All veterans would be able to ride the bus for free and a portion of the bus fares for the day would go to the Mason City Veteran’s Clinic. This would make the public happy and improve the transit system’s image. We suggest having promotions on or around holidays often since they are fairly easy to implement.



Starting on June 1st and running through August 1st any student, elementary through college can ride the bus for free with a valid student ID on the weekends (Thursday-Sunday.)

These are just a few promotional ideas that the transit system could implement. We think that by continuing holiday related and sustainability promotions it will really help improve the transit system’s image and increase ridership.

## **Budget and Implementation**

Mason City's revenue total for 2016 was \$63,000 and they have a budget for 2017 of \$64,000; although the advertising budget is only \$3,000 this fiscal year. They have bought new buses to replace old ones so we can budget into our campaign the supplies we will need. In order to increase the perception of taking the bus, we would like to put up more bus stop signs so riders won't have to flag it down, advertisements that would wrap around the bus to show how low it costs to take the bus and how sustainable it is, possibly a billboard in Mason City, fliers around the area, and finally look into marketing materials to showcase around Mason City. Anything that will help increase ridership and leave a positive reputation for the public transit system. Depending on what they would like to do, they have a budget for a few different items. Approximate cost of each item:

- Bus exterior ad: \$150-600 – per ad per 4-week period
- Standard bus shelter: ~ \$7,000
- Bus stop signage: \$14-45
- Fliers for advertising: \$250
- Yellow Page Ads: \$10-800
- Facebook Boosts: \$5-unlimited, depending on how much they want to spend
- TV Commercials: \$90-2,500

Dylan Schulte, Transit Operations and Safety Manager, is in charge of all implementation aspects from posting on social media, contacting media outlets, emails and developing all of their content. Long-term for the company, by putting in new bus stop signage/shelters, this will allow the members of the community to feel more comfortable as they wait for the bus and not have to worry about flagging it down. Short-term for the company, hanging fliers, implementing Facebook boosts and TV commercials, this will allow the bus system to get the word out immediately and directly. By making these changes, the bus system will be able to get the word out about the system and increasing ridership and public perception that being their end goal.

### **Mason City Public Transit 2017 Campaign**

Mariah Jones, Hanna Beary, Katie Sextro, Nikko Ebbola, Ben Marks

## **Evaluation**

To determine whether or not our objectives have been met we will start by documenting ridership monthly and then chart the increase we have every month and see if we have met our goal of 5% each month. We plan on having the Mason City Public Transit run an exit poll after six months to see how or if the public perception of the bus has changed positively after six months.

Furthermore, we will have the transit document the number of Mercy Hospital workers who are taking the bus and see if that number has risen as well after six months. Exit surveys will definitely be a key when it comes to measuring the success of our plan and whether or not we have met the objectives at hand.

We also want to get them on Facebook and would like to see them get over 500 followers after six months as well. Since right now they do not have a Facebook page of their own they are just merged with the city one. So we want them to get one of their own and see if they can reach 500 followers.

Improving the reputation of the transit in and of itself may be hard to measure. However, we believe that by implementing some of our special events like different free rides and fares for charity it would lead to more people riding the bus. This increase in ridership would go hand in hand with an increase in the public perception since for the most part people said they avoided the bus due to the types of people that ride it.

Finally, if the Mason City Public Transit is able to achieve all these goals and sustain lasting success within the community in turn our final goal would be met and it would enable them to maintain a lasting relationship with the Mason City community. This would be measured by continued ridership even beyond the six-month goal.

## **Appendix: Crisis Communication Plan**

The Mason City Public Transit has appointed the office of Development Services Department and the Transit Operations and Safety Manager, Dylan Schulte with managing all information during a crisis if one was to occur. Dylan oversees the Mason City Public Transit and is the most knowledgeable about the system. If an extreme crisis were to occur, Dylan would coordinate with the Director of Development Services Department Steven Van Steenhuyse in order to develop the appropriate message.

### *Crisis Situation*

A crisis is defined as any situation that requires immediate and coordinated actions or that the crisis will have a significant impact on the Mason City Public Transit system. Circumstances may include vehicle accidents harming passengers, bystanders or oncoming traffic as well as any severe collisions or possible explosions.

### *Purpose*

Although each crisis will require a unique response, this crisis communications plan provides procedures for the coordination of external and internal communication for the Mason City Public Transit in the event of a crisis. The purpose of the plan is to ensure that the public transit system is taking necessary precautions to ensure further safety of all parties involved.

### *Action Plan*

To ensure that the Mason City Public Transit information response to a crisis is quick, active, sensitive and responsible way, the office of Development Services Department and the Transit Operation Manager will coordinate all crisis communications with media outlets.

For immediate and ongoing responses, the office of Development Services Department and the Transit Operation Manager will first:

- Alert the Director of the Development Services Department about crisis.
- Assess severity and level of impact.
- Determine if an official statement should be prepared and released via media outlets.
- The Director of Development Services Department and the Transit Operation Manager will develop the message.
- The two will brief all personnel who will be answering phone calls, emails, and social media posts.

The immediate response should be produced within the hour of the crisis or situation.

#### *Monitoring and Follow-Up*

Once the action plan is completed and the situation begins to de-escalate it is important to continue to ensure the public's safety and satisfaction given through the Mason City Public Transit. This will happen through updates via social media as well as posting on the Mason City website.

#### **Conclusion**

Overall, Mason City Public Transit is working well to serve its current riders. They need help with expanding their ridership and finding ways to reach other demographics they have not been able to connect with. They have the ability to reach a new demographic by reaching out to the Northern Iowa Area Community College and seeing about advertising for a "students ride free campaign" on their website. Also, by making their midnight special bus more visible on their website they have a good chance of expanding their ridership and being a more attractive choice for those people who work at the hospital. We would like to see if a stronger social media presence would benefit them and attract some of the younger crowd they have failed to reach. We would also like to see what kind of advertising campaign would work best for them.

#### **Mason City Public Transit 2017 Campaign**

Mariah Jones, Hanna Beary, Katie Sextro, Nikko Ebbola, Ben Marks